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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BASRAH 000005

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IZ](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: BASRAH'S REACTION TO DE-BA'ATHIFICATION

REF: A. BAGHDAD 266
[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 338

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CLASSIFIED BY: John Naland, Leader, PRT Basra, Dept of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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Summary
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[1](#)1. (C) The conflict over de-Ba'athification has sparked three demonstrations in Basrah, and provoked strong reactions from the government and influential leaders. While a demarche to the Provincial Council Chair appears to have dampened emotions over perceived USG involvement in this issue, the issue remains potent and politically useful. There is no lack of theories from prominent Basrawis on who was behind the latest de-Ba'athification effort, and who might profit or suffer from it. Basrah's body politic reacted vehemently against the Court of Cassation's February 3 ruling staying the parliamentary Accountability and Justice Commission (AJC) ban on some 500 candidates, which was later withdrawn on February 7. Many PRT contacts view the de-Ba'athification process as an effort to isolate secular and nationalist political entities. PRT intervened with influential local tribal leader Khathem al-Ghatrani (Sunni Iraqiyya supporter) to prevent him from organizing a boycott in response to the de-Ba'athification order. End summary.

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AJC Actions Provoke Two Demonstrations
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[1](#)2. (C) Before the AJC finalized the list of disqualified candidates on de-Ba'athification grounds, members of the Shi'a-led Coalition of National Unity demonstrated in Basrah on January 12 in support of its Secretary General Nehru Mohammed Abdel Kareem al-Kasnazani. They feared he might be barred from the March elections by the AJC. (Note: According to a list obtained from IHEC, 21 Basrah candidates were recommended for exclusion by the AJC. Kasnazani's banned Coalition of National Unity fared the worst. Five of its Basrah candidates were excluded. Allawi's Iraqiyya coalition had three on the list, and the PM's State of Law coalition had two barred. End note.) Basrah journalist Mahmoud Bachari told PRToffs that 50-80 protestors were mainly followers of Kasnazani and not people protesting the ban as a whole. That said, a spokesman for the group told Radio Sawa that the AJC's expected ban on Kasnazani and others was motivated by sectarianism, and risked destroying the democratic process.

[1](#)3. (C) On January 21, Basrah was the setting for a larger demonstration in support of the ACJ's de-Ba'athification order. A journalist who covered the event told us the demonstration stretched for several kilometers and drew thousands. General Mohammed al-Huweidi, the head of Iraqi Army security for Basrah,

confirmed to the PRT that it was a large demonstration, but estimated less than a thousand people participated. During the demonstration, pictures of Ba'athists from the prior regime were burned, and demonstrators called for criminal proceedings against those who had been identified by the ACJ for disqualification.

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Court Ruling Sparks Strong Reaction

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¶4. (C) The Court of Cassation's February 3 decision delaying the de-Ba'athification adjudications until after the election ignited a strong reaction from the Basrah government and population. On February 7, the Provincial Council (PC) adopted a resolution rejecting the ruling. The resolution also called for the Council of Representatives to withdraw all confidence in the court, its judges, and the ruling. The PC condemned all foreign interference in Iraqi internal affairs, specifically warning of USG and "Arabian country" interference. On February 8, PRTOff explained the USG position to PC Chair Jabar Amin Jabar (Da'wa Tantheem), underlining USG opposition to the Ba'ath party and support for Iraq's independent judiciary. Jabar seemed to understand the explanation and said that he would strike references to USG interference from future resolutions.

¶5. (C) A day after the PC adopted its resolution, demonstrators took to the street to protest the court's ruling. According to Bachari, some 2,500-3,000 people gathered in downtown Basrah and marched to the Governor's Office. Governor Shiltagh Aboud (SLA/Da'wa) spoke to the protestors, as he had during the January 21 demonstration. At the first protest he had rejected the return of Ba'athists to government. He upped the ante during the second stating that he would "start a campaign to remove the Ba'athists from all departments in all governorates."

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Officially Neutral, but Personally Biased

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¶6. (C) PC Chair Jabar Amin Jabar confirmed the reports of his and the Governor's appearance at the protests. He said an appearance was standard protocol whenever demonstrators appeared outside their office building. Prior to the court's ruling, the PC Chair told PRTOff that though he personally favored the AJC's ban, he was officially neutral. He claimed that in the first round of protests for and against the AJC ban, he had met with representatives of both groups. The media reported his meeting with those supporting the de-Ba'athification ban and his strong statements against letting Ba'athist "criminals" into the next government. There were no reports on his meeting with the opponents of the ban.

¶7. (C) Jabar's official neutrality, questionable even before the Court of Cassation ruling, dissolved completely after it. Calling the court ruling a political decision, he drove adoption of the PC resolution condemning it, and publicly supported the demonstrators protesting it. In a conversation with PRTOff, Jabar defended his actions and the PC resolution as a "humanitarian response" in support of Basrawis who suffered under Ba'athist rule. Jabar remarked that he was imprisoned for seven years and his brother was hanged. He believed the "constitutional" working of the AJC had addressed a real threat of Ba'athist resurgence, which was then undermined by the "illegal and "political" decision" of the Court of Cassation. (Note: The Court of Cassation reversed itself on February 7, and agreed to complete all appeals by the first day of the official campaign on February 12. See ref B. End note.)

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Public Largely Favors Ban but Concerns Are Voiced

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¶8. (C) The disparity between the two large demonstrations and one small protest on either side of the de-Ba'athification issue mirrors the split in Basrah public opinion. Taleb al-Baderi, a well known local TV reporter, told PRToff that the majority of Basrah's largely Shi'a population favors the AJC actions. Other PRT contacts told us that Basrah's relatively small Sunni population generally objects to the ban. One influential Sunni tribal sheikh, Khadthem al-Ghatrani, a strong supporter of Allawi and his Iraqiyya coalition, threatened to lead a boycott of the national elections if Saleh Mutlaq was not reinstated on the ballot. Sheikh Ghatrani reconsidered following an intervention by PRT Leader, and said that he would vote in the election and urge others to follow suit.

¶9. (C) A sampling of our contacts from across the political spectrum reveals a general view that the de-Ba'athification move was political. While several contacts suspected PM Maliki was behind it, others saw it as Iran's handiwork, citing Chalabi and Lami's prominent roles.

-- Walid Keitan, a Shi'a member of Allawi's Iraqi National Movement party, considered the ban as another example of Maliki's using the levers of government power to benefit his party. He suggested that Mutlaq's removal would be beneficial for the PM by diminishing the chances of the Iraqiyya coalition.

-- Awad al-Abdan, a local Sunni leader who heads a Basrah-based anti-Iranian group (Movement for Liberation of the South), saw the de-certification of "these national, liberal" candidates as a blow to everyone who was trying to build a stronger national, non-sectarian identity for Iraq.

-- Similarly Sunni Sheikh and PC member Abd al-Karim al-Dusari saw the move as Maliki's attempt to exclude nationalist figures from the election. He said the growth of nationalist parties that could appeal across sectarian lines threatened the Da'wa party and the PM.

-- Basrah business mogul Hatem Bachari viewed the ban as Maliki's attempt to stay in power, but said that his de-Ba'athification push might ultimately hurt the Prime Minister by alienating those who saw him as a budding nationalist. His cousin, Mahmoud Bachari saw Iran behind the ban, but believed Maliki would profit from it.

-- Khadim al-Hussein, head of the Basrah branch of the Communist Party, said that the fear of Ba'athists is real and widespread in the province. He believed that both Da'wa and ISCI created the Ba'athist scare because they believed they were losing popular support, and could use it to consolidate their electoral base.

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Comment
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¶10. (C) In this predominantly Shi'a province, it makes sense that the public opinion and reaction would be break significantly in favor of the de-Ba'athification effort. That said, among the Basrah elite, both Shi'a and Sunni, there are prominent players supporting reconciliation and favoring a ban limited solely to those Ba'athists who acted criminally in the Saddam era. While some of our interlocutors question the wisdom of the latest de-Ba'atification push, all have a ready answer for who was behind it and who is likely benefit from it. A demarche to the PC Chair appears to have dampened emotions over USG involvement, but Basrah's body politic refuses to let go of the de-Ba'athification issue. Given its potency and political usefulness, we can expect the Governor and the PC to keep de-Ba'athification alive throughout the election season and perhaps beyond.

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